

# Queens of the sea

## Women involved in sustainable fishing take the stage at Slow Fish 2019

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**S**low Food is a global network of local communities, founded in 1989, to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions and counteract the rise of the fast food culture. Since its founding, Slow Food has grown into a global movement involving millions of people in over 160 countries, working to ensure that everyone has access to good, clean and fair food.

Slow Fish, which is an international campaign of Slow Food and a Slow Food event held once every two years in Genoa, Italy, gathers academics, researchers, small-scale fishers, representatives of public bodies, and enthusiasts to discuss sustainable fishing and production, responsible fish consumption and the health of marine and freshwater ecosystems. A large market, conferences, meetings, workshops, and tasting sessions make Slow Fish a unique event entirely dedicated to the world of fish. The event takes place in odd-numbered years and is organized by Slow Food and the Region of Liguria with the patronage of the City of Genoa and Italy's Ministry for Environment, Land and Sea Protection, with the support of the Genoa Chamber of Commerce and the participation of MIPAAF (Italy's Ministry for Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies).

The sea is a source of food and natural resources, energy, and also a means of transportation. It stores carbon dioxide and produces oxygen. It provides livelihoods and employment in the fisheries for more than 60 million people around the world. Unfortunately, however, the sea is all too often taken for granted. The time has come for each one of us to act to protect it for future generations. Among the major threats that the sea is facing are the harmful effects of climate change; pollution from plastics, microplastics, and other chemicals; the damage caused by human activities to coastal areas and natural habitats; and indiscriminate fishing, putting species like bluefin tuna at the risk of extinction.

For this reason, 'The Sea: A Common Good' was chosen as the theme for the 2019 edition of Slow Fish, which took place from 9 to 12, May 2019. The focus of the event was on positive messages, good practices, decreasing global warming, and resisting single-use plastic. The connection between environmental, social, and gastronomic issues has always been particularly

strong at Slow Fish, showing how consumers, fishers, chefs, and scientists all have a role to play in protecting the sea.

Members of small-scale fishing communities from all over the world attend the event, and several fisherwomen shared particularly interesting stories. The role of women in fisheries is often underestimated, as fishing is usually perceived as a male activity. Women, however, play a crucial role in fishing communities around the world. They clean and process the fish for selling in markets. Some even take to fishing, challenging traditional gender roles.

A South Korean delegation of fishers presented a unique fishing method performed by female divers (haenyeo) of Jeju Island: fisherwomen dive ten metres underwater holding their breath to harvest seafood by hand. Interestingly, this job requiring strong physical endurance and specific breathing techniques is performed by women in their 50s and 60s, with some even in their 80s or 90s. This unique knowledge is passed down through the generations. However, this purely female fishing method risks becoming extinct as the number of haenyeo has decreased dramatically over the years, from 23,000 in 1965 to just 4,000 diving fishers in 2015. "Many people do not want their family members to become a haenyeo because today women have more opportunities to get a good education and a good job. We are concerned about declining numbers," says Minsoo Kim, Slow Food International Councillor from South Korea, adding that it is vital to find ways to "continue this tradition."

Among the women present at the event was also Sally Barnes, who has been preparing smoked fish "for longer than she can remember" and is the only person in Ireland who still smokes wild salmon. Barnes uses an ancient method, which consists of putting the fish under salt and then drying it with smoke. It took her about three years of experimentation with different smoking techniques to find the best method: salt, beechwood, and no dyes. "Dyes allow fish producers to create a product much more rapidly, so they sell you a lot of water in the fish. With the slow smoking technique, the fish retains much more of its natural flavor". The intensive production of farmed salmon is a huge challenge for Barnes. Another challenge is getting fresh fish, as the boats usually go to

the sea for six days and keep their catch on ice until they come back to shore. Although Barnes agrees that it is tough to be a woman in the fishing world, the last wild salmon smoker says she wouldn't want to do anything else.

Another woman with a powerful story is Barbara Rostenburg-Geerstsena, an oyster gatherer on the Wadden Sea in the Netherlands. The sea, whose shores extend to Denmark and Germany, is often called a "sea of mud" as part of the coast is periodically submerged by tides. The Wadden Sea is very shallow and demand specific fishing techniques. Due to these unique conditions, the fishers of the Wadden Sea rarely fish in other seas, as this would typically require different fishing equipment, boats, and licenses. Says Barbara, "We are dependent on this little piece of water, and this gives you a special connection to your profession. In the last decades, the number of fish has decreased in the Wadden Sea, and so has the number of fishers. Changes in the ecosystem pose a threat to some species, and it also poses a threat to us and our fishing tradition." She adds that, unlike in the neighboring North Sea, it has been historically common practice for wife and husband to fish together in the Wadden Sea. However, this tendency is changing, and fewer women are directly involved in fishing now.


Slow Food is also working to bring indigenous peoples' voices to the forefront of the debate on food and culture, to institutionalise indigenous peoples' participation in the movement and its projects, and to develop both regional and global networks. Several indigenous communities were at the center of the conversations at Slow Fish. For many small-scale fishers and coastal indigenous communities, fish is much more than food, it is a way of life. These communities are facing significant threats from climate change and industrial fishing, which risk cutting the ancient ties between indigenous peoples and the oceans. At Slow Fish, three delegates from the Netherlands, Finland, and South Africa shared their experiences of working with their local indigenous and small-scale fishing communities. Here are their stories.

Chef Loubie Rusch from South Africa works side by side with local communities to promote their products. She told the Slow Fish audience about a new project in Cape Town, ABALOB, which works with small-scale fishers. "It is a series of five applications that we have developed along the entire supply chain. In South Africa, small-scale fishers are marginalized, completely invisible, and the quotas give preference to industrial fishing. This application has enabled small-scale fishers to collect their data and gave them direct access to chefs." The project has also developed a QR code, which is used by partnering chefs and their restaurants. By scanning the QR code on the menu, customers

can read about who caught the fish and how it was caught. It also provides further information on the sustainability rating of the fish and a detailed description of the species. "It is an incredibly empowering tool which is benefiting small-scale fishers," said Rusch, who is planning to introduce fishers to indigenous coastal foods which could be either harvested wild or brought into cultivation. "This is another layer that could contribute to the fishers' livelihoods."

Lauri Hamalainen is a Finnish fisher from North Karelia, and a member of Snowchange, an organization that works with indigenous communities in the north of the country. Over the years, Snowchange has become an essential scientific reference point in the debate on climate change and traditional fishing techniques in the region. Says Hamalainen, "In recent years, winters have become very warm and secure ice, a central requirement for seining, today comes a few months later and starts melting a few months earlier than it used to. Often fishers take risks by working on unsecure ice. In the North, we are clearly witnessing climate change in action, and its effect on our fishing tradition."

Mariëlle Klein Lankhorst is a Dutch photographer with a passion for travel. Her most important journey has turned into a long-term project around Europe's coasts, including the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Ireland, where she met small-scale fishers and told their stories through pictures. "Everyone knows what a fisher is and everyone is aware of the crisis in fisheries. However, the story often lacks nuance, so I share more colorful light on small-scale fishing as a livelihood. What I have learned is that fishers are extremely passionate about what they do. It is not just their job; it is their way of life." Through her observations of small-scale fishers, Klein Lankhorst has learned about the daily obstacles that they face in Europe. She noticed that despite being generally optimistic in nature, fishers tend to become melancholic when discussing the future. The rules of the European Union favour industrial rather than small-scale fishing, and small-scale fishers are less well-organized, have less time and political clout. Klein Lankhorst called the current situation "threatening", and drew attention to the shocking statistics: "Eighty percent of fishing boats in Europe are small-scale, yet they account just 14 percent of the total value of the catch."

These are just some of the interesting stories that were shared at Slow Fish. If you would like to attend the next edition of the event, which will take place in 2021, stay tuned at [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)! 

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